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New spawning reef could turn Detroit River into a love nest

Project off Belle Isle to help sturgeon breed

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BY HUGH MCDIARMID JR.

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The Great Lakes lake sturgeon -- a monster-sized fish with prehistoric lineage, a life span of 150 years and a face only a momma sturgeon could love -- is being invited to fool around in the Detroit River.

A \$500,000 artificial spawning reef just offshore of Belle Isle will be ready in time for the sturgeon's spawning run next spring, local, state and federal officials announced Thursday.

They also announced a \$350,000 upgrade to the island's Blue Heron Lagoon. The lagoon, an ecological treasure trove, will be more accessible to the public after the restoration of a 9-acre natural area and construction of access points including fishing areas.

But the lagoon plan was overshadowed by the sturgeon news Thursday at a gathering of fisheries experts on Belle Isle.

The goal: Bring back natural breeding that has been virtually nonexistent in the river since the 1900s.

"There is very limited evidence that they are successfully spawning at all" in the river, said John Hartig, Detroit River navigator.

It wasn't always so.

In the late 1800s, fishermen's nets were clogged with the ugly, hard-scaled fish that can grow as large as 7 feet. In June of 1880, 4,000 sturgeon, each more than 100 pounds, were pulled from the river and lower Lake St. Clair.

Fast forward to the years 1999-2003: For weeks on end each year, researchers throw huge lines with 200 baited hooks into the river's current, but average only 20 sturgeon each year. The ones they catch are tagged and returned to the river. But they are big, older sturgeon -- virtually no youngsters that would indicate natural reproduction is taking place.

The reason is simple, said Bruce Manny, a fishery biologist with the U.S.

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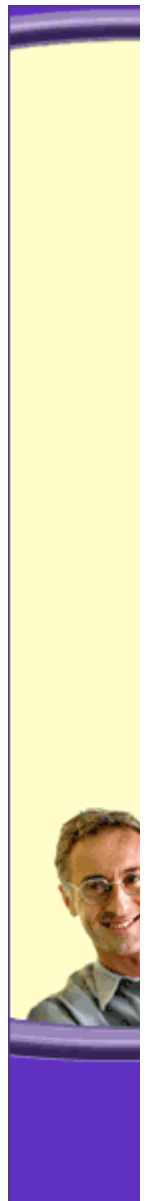
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The reason is simple, said Bruce Manny, a fishery biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey.

"We mined out the gravel by dredging the river for shipping, and for building the buildings you see in Detroit today," said Manny. "No gravel, no spawning. Left with nothing but the mucky, spongy bottom of the river, the females simply never lay eggs."

Scientists recorded sturgeon spawning in other areas of Michigan -- the St. Clair River near Port Huron and near Algonac, the Black River near Cheboygan, the St. Mary's River in the Upper Peninsula and some tributaries to Lake Michigan.

But the Detroit River was long considered barren of sturgeon spawning habitat.

Then, on May 9, 2001, a eureka moment.

Central Michigan University researcher Nathan Caswel, was stalking two male sturgeon tagged with sound-emitting devices. They were leaking sperm, but their odds of finding a female ready to lay eggs was virtually zero.

Alone in an 18-foot aluminum boat with an outboard motor, Caswel used an underwater microphone to follow the fish to a heavily polluted section of the river near Zug Island. Surrounded by the smokestacks and flame-spewing steel factories, Caswel's equipment picked up a third fish. The three came together on top of a man-made pile of coal cinders.

Caswel's adrenaline surged and he dialed up Manny and told him he *knew* this is a menage a trois. "It was on one of the armpits of the Detroit River," Manny recalled later, shaking his head.

Manny dropped everything and rushed to Home Depot to construct something he'd only read about -- an egg-gathering device made from a 60-cent cinder block covered with furnace-filter material. Within hours, they dropped the homemade trap on the spot where the three sturgeon tangoed. Up came eggs.

"It was hallelujah. It was the first verified instance of sturgeon spawning in the Detroit River," Manny said. "Then we got the idea, why not build them some substrate of their own?"

The result is the federally funded project to create three 50-by-80 foot squares of rock and gravel under 20 to 28 feet of water in a fast-moving section of the river. Partly in deference to the 2001 discovery, one of the squares will be filled with coal cinders.

Manny said plans may include a permanent video camera so that anyone with Internet access can watch the sturgeon on the gravel bars.

"If we build it, they will come. Like that movie," Manny predicted.

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